

STAY OUT OF THE FUN HOUSE

Mark Less, forty and in debt, is sailing his boat on Indian Lake. Blue sky, two puffy clouds, five or six seagulls. Ahead, a finger of blue-green land.

Shots ring out. Plumes of water splash around the boat and, with a loud ping, one of the clouds falls over, revealing a hinge. Two of the birds also fall. More hinges. The air snarls with slugs; the water is beaten into white-caps.

Mark ducks, prays and maneuvers his boat towards the spit of land. He makes it and looks back. Another sail boat is coming along. Two puffy clouds are overhead, five or six wheeling seagulls.

SITUATION NORMAL

Six weeks after my father died, I saw him on Fifth Avenue. Holy God, I'd know him anywhere. That red nose, pock-marked face. He wore his Army raincoat and the beret he found in a movie.

I ran home and told Nanda. She said not to worry, it was normal. I couldn't accept his death so I imagined that he was alive. "Shit," I yelled, "I don't give a damn about him, never did." Nanda shook her head. "Unconsciously, you do."

Two days later, he came to my office and stood by the door. I didn't know what to do, so I gave him the thumbs up signal. Usually he liked that and would give me the finger in reply. But not this time. He just walked away. Maybe he didn't like being a ghost.

After that, I saw him all the time. In a bar, on a bus, coming out of the same porno flick I was going into. We never stopped, never said anything. Just like when he was alive.

THINGS ARE TOUGH ALL OVER

"That's him now," Laura says, putting down her tea. The messenger is flapping his large angel-like wings outside the window. She pulls it open and he alights in the office.

"Hi."

"Good morning."

Billings, the office manager, rolls up the messenger's pants leg and removes the capsule. The messenger, mildly acned and dangling a toothpick from the corner of his mouth, winks at the receptionist.

"Fine, thanks," says Billings.

The messenger stares. Oh. The manager hands him a coin and returns to his desk. The youth is transfixed by the coin.

"Look," Billings shouts, "that's it. Buzz off!"

The messenger dives out the window, spreading his angel wings and throwing a shadow over the office. He turns, thumbs his nose, and flies away.

DRY RUN

I called Milt. "Where were you at two o'clock, a week ago yesterday?"

"Asleep," he said. "No wait, on the subway, reading How To Eat Like A Teenager."

"Gilda?"

She couldn't remember.

"Try."

"Shit," she was embarrassed. "Working. Writing copy for new, improved Pampers. What else?"

Donald was in his walk-in closet, groping on the floor for a coin he heard fall. He knew it was two o'clock because the clock struck in the church down the street and he thought, what if I die now?

Marvin was in the john, looking at his watch and worrying his colon.

Della, I know, was in bed, having sex with everyone she could imagine when she was supposed to be walking her kid in the park.

"Why?" they asked.

"Because," I said, "it almost happened, that's why."

COLD FRONT

He sits in his garden, amusing himself by moving the cumulus clouds around in the sky. But, after a half hour or so, a gray front starts moving in from the west; he tries to fight it off, tries to hold it back so that he can play with his summer clouds, but it is no good. A cold wind springs up. The gray clouds fill the sky and there is the smell of rain.

He gets up and, shivering, picks up his chair. He notices a woman in the window of the house next door. She is looking at him. Her arms are folded and she is smiling.